

Salem Manufacturing Company: Arista Cotton Mill, 1880
200 Brookstown Avenue
Winston-Salem
Forsyth County
North Carolina

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PHOTOGRAPHS

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HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

Salem Manufacturing Company: Arista Cotton Mill

NC-3

Location: 200 Brookstown Avenue
Winston-Salem
Eorsyth County, North Carolina

Date of Construction: 1880

Original Owner:

Present Owner: A. Craig and R. Brawley

Significance: The Arista Mill complex is the oldest physical reminder of three forgotten elements in the history of Winston-Salem: Although the development and reputation of this city has been dominated by tobacco manufacturing, its industrial foundations were laid by the textile industry; Although the Moravian town of Salem is celebrated today for its craft traditions, it played an equally significant role in the industrial revolution and the transition to industries of mass production; Finally, although the contributions of well-known families such as Hanes, Gray, and Reynolds have long been recognized, the achievements of the Fries family of Salem in manufacturing, banking, and transportation were also vital to the development and growth of this Piedmont city.

Historian: Brent D. Glass, 1976.

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ARISTA MILL COMPLEX

The Arista Mill complex is the oldest physical reminder of three forgotten elements in the history of Winston-Salem. Although the development and reputation of this city has been dominated by tobacco manufacturing, its industrial foundations were laid by the textile industry. Although the Moravian town of Salem is celebrated today for its craft traditions, it played an equally significant role in the industrial revolution and the transition to industries of mass production. Finally, although the contributions of well-known families such as Hanes, Gray, and Reynolds have long been recognized, the achievements of the Fries family of Salem in manufacturing, banking, and transportation were also vital to the development and growth of this Piedmont city.

The textile manufacturing tradition in Salem dates from 1835 when Francis Levan Fries and other local businessmen organized the Salem Manufacturing Company. In some ways, Fries was not a likely candidate for pioneering work in manufacturing. He was a descendant of German Lutherans who had joined the Moravian Church at Herrnhut, Saxony, in the eighteenth century and migrated to Salem, North Carolina, in 1809. Fries was born in 1812, attended Salem Boys School, prepared for the Moravian ministry at Nazareth Hall in Pennsylvania and came back to Salem in the 1830s planning to teach and study law.¹

Instead he shifted his attention to the industrial development of Salem. After the Salem Manufacturing Company was organized, Fries journeyed to New England for a year's study of cotton textile manufacturing processes and techniques. He returned to supervise the construction and equipping of what was probably North Carolina's "most modern mill. . . up to that time." He served as superintendent until 1839 and then left the company to establish a woolen mill on Brookstown Avenue which began manufacturing Salem jeans in 1840.²

Fries was joined by his brother, Henry, in 1846, and established the F. & H. Fries Manufacturing Company. A cotton factory was built in 1848 adjoining the woolen mill. In 1856, the Fries brothers obtained control of the Salem Manufacturing Company and fitted the mill up with flour milling machinery. A gas plant was installed in 1858 to provide lights for the mills and a new Corliss engine was set in place in 1860.³ Thus the Fries family and their enterprises provided a transitional element in the development of the Moravian village, which had been established as a manufacturing center for domestic industry. Their contribution was to transform the tradition from eighteenth century craft industries to nineteenth century mass production.

Although Francis Fries died at the age of fifty-one in 1863, he had already established an instrial base in Salem upon which his sons, John W., Francis H., and Henry E. could build. Following the Civil War, each son entered the partnership of F. & H. Fries, devoting their careers to the essential elements of growth and development in the Piedmont--industry, finance, and transportation.

The Arista Cotton Mill was the first Fries enterprise constructed in the post-Civil War period. Francis H. Fries supervised construction of this spinning and weaving mill in 1880. It was located just one block west of the original Fries woolen and cotton factory. From the outset, the mill was an important factor in the prosperity of the city (Winston and Salem were still separate entities until 1913). a publication of 1888 described the mill as "a decided achievement in modern manufacturing. This structrue was erected on the most approved plans of the successful New England cotton mills at a cost for building and equipment of about \$125,000."⁴

The mill was among the first in the South to use electric lights. It was first equipped with 3312 spindles but within five years the number of spindles doubled and 180 looms were added for the manufacture of chambray cloth for work clothing. This machinery was powered by a 200 horsepower Corliss engine built in Chester, Pennsylvania. "The massive motor," exuded the 1888 Chamber of Commerce publication, "weighs 26 tons but works as smoothly and steadily as a sewing machine. The fly wheel is 20 feet in diameter . . . the face of the rim is 28 inches in width and turns the machinery by aid of a belt 130 feet in length . . ."⁵

The mill⁶ provided employment for about 150 workers, about 70 men and 80 women. It also anchored a small industrial complex that included the Wachovia Flour Mills (c. 1856, 1880); a cotton warehouse (1880); an ice plant (c. 1905); Indera Cotton Mills (1914); and a transformer station (1899) which supplied electricity to the complex and to other manufacturing and transportation outlets in Winston-Salem. A 750,000 gallon reservoir, located just south of the complex, provided water for the boilers and fire protection systems.

The Arista Mill was only the first of several textile and manufacturing enterprises undertaken by the sons of Francis Fries. Colonel Francis H. Fries (honored for his service on the staff of Governor A. M. Scales) built the Indera Cotton Mill (1914) in Winston-Salem, the Mayo (1896) and Avalon (1899) Mills in Rockingham County, and the Washington Mills (1902) in Fries, Virginia. He also⁸ served as president of the Brown and Williamson Tobacco Company.

Henry E. Fries organized the South Side Cotton Mills (1885) in Winston-Salem. John W. Fries, an inventor as well as a businessman, developed the design for the centrifugal dehumidifier for textile mills which led to the creation of the Normalair Company (later part of the Bahnson Company of Winston-Salem.)

In addition to their role as industrial leaders, the Fries brothers made enormous contributions in the field of finance and transportation. John W. Fries served as president of the Fealty Building and Loan Association and the National Bank of Winston-Salem. Francis H. Fries supervised the construction of the Roanoke and Southern Railway (now part of the Norfolk & Western system) which connected Winston-Salem with Roanoke, Virginia. He also served as president of Wachovia Loan and Trust Company which later merged with Wachovia National Bank to form Wachovia Bank and Trust Company, now the largest bank in the South. Henry E. Fries supervised construction of the Winston-Salem Southbound Railway to Wadesboro and organized the Fries Manufacturing and Power Company which constructed the first hydroelectric facility in North Carolina at Idols on the Yadkin River in 1899.

The impressive range of activity by this family has led many local historians of Winston-Salem to challenge the idea that the city's development was tied solely to the fortunes of its tobacco interests. "The industrial tradition," concluded one historian, "indeed (Winston-Salem's) very existence as an industrial center of importance, is not so much the result of the efforts of the Reynolds and Hanes families as it is the product of earlier work by Francis Levan Fries and his three sons."¹⁰

As the Fries economic empire grew in size and scope, the remnants of its 19th century origins declined in importance. The antebellum woolen and cotton factory ceased operation around 1900 and was later destroyed. The Arista Mill, which operated from 1880 through the mid-1920s, remained a relatively small operation, never running more than 7700 spindles and 450 looms at its peak. The Wachovia Flour Mill suspended operations around the turn of the century and was converted for use by the Arista Mill.¹¹

The Arista Mill Company was incorporated in 1903 with John W. Fries as president.¹² However, even by this date, the small mill could not compete with the larger operations being built in Gastonia, Greensboro, Concord, and West Durham. By the mid-1920s, the mill was operating at a reduced schedule, a victim of the general depression that affected the entire textile industry a decade before the rest of

the nation. By 1927, the Arista Mill was used as a warehouse for the Brown and Williamson Tobacco Company.¹³ It continues to serve as a warehouse today for the Lentz Transfer and Storage Company of Winston-Salem. The ice plant has been destroyed but the old cotton warehouse and the transformer station still stand. The complex stands as a visible reminder of North Carolina's foremost industry and one of her foremost families.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ Samuel A. Ashe, etc., Biographical History of North Carolina, volume III, (Greensboro: Charles L. Van Hoppen, 1905).
- ² Chester S. Davis, "The City's Forgotten Legacy," Winston-Salem Journal, October 11, 1970, Section D, p. 1, hereinafter cited as Davis, "Forgotten Legacy."
- ³ Adelaide Fries, "One Hundred Years of Textiles in Salem," North Carolina Historical Review January, 1950, 15-19.
- ⁴ Description of Winston-Salem, Chamber of Commerce, 1888.
- ⁵ Ibid., see also Richard W. Griffin, "Reconstruction of the North Carolina Textile Industry, 1865-1885," North Carolina Historical, volume 41, Winter, 1964.
- ⁶ North Carolina Bureau of Labor Statistics, 29th Report, 1915, 298.
- ⁷ Sanborn Map Company, Winston-Salem, 1885 (p. 7); 1895 (p. 13), 1900 (p. 19); 1907 (p. 30).
- ⁸ Majorie Young, editor. Textile Leaders of the South, (Anderson, S.C.: James R. Young, 1963), 65.
- ⁹ Davis, "Forgotten Legacy."
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ Sanborn Map Company, Winston-Salem, 1912 (p. 30).
- ¹² Adelaide Fries, Forsyth County, 175
- ¹³ Sanborn Map Company, Winston-Salem, 1927 (p. 31-32).

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